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Your regional stone-curlew project newsletter

Issue no 06 winter 2013/ 2014

Chalk Country

Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Hit hard by the cold

The wet spring of 2012 combined with the big freeze of 2013, may have wiped out a third of stone-curlews.

Sadly, 2013 was another bad year for stone-curlews. Birds arriving back from migration were met with extreme cold and we know that many stayed on the south coast for several weeks before heading to the Wessex breeding grounds.

Our field team unsurprisingly recorded a big drop in overall numbers, with many birds taking considerably longer to reach breeding condition and some not managing it at all. The first nests were three weeks later than normal, clutches were smaller, and some eggs appeared mis-shapen.

Once the weather warmed up we hoped that chick survival would be high, but this was not the case. In all we recorded just 28 fledglings.

This is the lowest total for many years, and the population appears to have been knocked back to a level recorded over five years ago. It is likely that it will take some time to recover after these two successive poor seasons, and it goes to show that, despite huge success in bringing the numbers up in previous years, the species remains vulnerable.

For further information contact Nick Tomalin
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33% down

Just 94 pairs bred in Wessex in 2013, raising only 28 chicks, a huge decline from 142 pairs raising 104 chicks in 2011



Nick Tomalin

In Wessex five birds were found dead after the frosts in early April, all of which were underweight. Many more will have perished and gone undetected. The loss of these breeding adults is particularly devastating.

Also in this issue...

- Winterbourne Downs flourishes
- Lost stone-curlew returned to the wild
- A bumper bustard year
- South West Farmland Bird Initiative (SWFBI)
- New LIFE+ for stone-curlews across the UK

Winterbourne Downs flourishes

A good harvest of wheat and barley was dampened only by low prices and the poor stone curlew productivity of 2013.

Our reserve has become a haven for stone-curlew, with up to six pairs breeding on our special plots. Unfortunately, 2013 was a difficult year for stone-curlews across the board, including the reserve. Out of five breeding pairs, despite seven nesting attempts and eight chicks hatching, we only fledged two chicks. The likely causes are the prolonged cold spell putting birds in poor condition, poor chick food availability and pressure from predation. Fingers crossed that 2014 will be a better year for them.

The wet autumn of 2012 leading in to a very cold spring meant that oil seed rape germination was very poor. Much of it had to be abandoned and re-drilled with barley, and the remainder yielded poorly. We had bumper crops of wheat and barley, but did not get high prices for our grain as it seems many other farmers also managed to produce high yields.

Early winter brought in a flock of around 400 golden plover to the

farm. These roosted and fed on one of our stone-curlew plots, demonstrating what a valuable resource they are to birds all year round.

We were having problems with high thistle burdens in our Wild Bird Seed mixtures, so in 2013 we tried using a one year mix rather than a biannual mix. The new mixes have been very productive and have been supporting a wide variety of birds such as linnet, yellowhammer, reed bunting and even an overwintering blackcap.

We have also decided to gradually replace our flock of North Country Mule sheep with Romney Marsh, as they are more suited to our unimproved, nutrient poor grassland and outdoor lambing,

In autumn, we experimented by harvesting grassland seed from our reversions using our combine. This was quite successful, with the collected seed processing quite cleanly, and we were able to sell much of the seed to Heritage Seeds, with some going to grassland restoration projects at the Cholderton and Highclere Estates. The remainder will go to enhance other areas of our farm.



Patrick Cashman

Species rich chalk grassland-it's official.

The Winterbourne Downs arable reversion programme was completed in 2011 and we now have a total of 162ha of semi-natural grassland in various stages of development. We assessed the grasslands older than three years to establish whether they

1. Were recognisable as "chalk grasslands" using the National Vegetation Classification, and
2. Had sufficient chalk indicators to pass Natural England's criteria for species-rich grassland.

We were pleased all fields met criteria no.2; however, there were a number of species missing that would be expected in a typical Salisbury Plain sward, so our next step is to source the seed for these missing species.



Patrick Cashman

SITA trust small blue butterfly project has enabled some big changes to take place.

With new funding from the SITA trust we're carrying out lots of exciting butterfly habitat creation works at the reserve. Part of this project has involved creating large "butterfly banks" – steep sided, south facing slopes which will support a range of chalk downland plants including horseshoe vetch, and their

associated chalk butterfly species. In time we hope they will support a suite of chalk grassland butterflies such as the small blue, adonis blue and chalkhill blue.

We have opened up 2 pre-existing embankments, which were part of the old railway line that runs through the reserve. This has created 2 south facing slopes which have also been sown with butterfly food plants.

We have also landscaped a large, 100m long and 3m high s-shaped bank and have sown it with butterfly larval food plants such as kidney vetch and devils-bit scabious. With the seed funded by the SITA trust, the whole reserve should become even more of a haven for butterflies.

For further information contact Keeley Spate keeley.spate@rspb.org.uk

Lidl lost bird returned to wild



Nick Tomalin

In July, a Devizes resident found a 'strange bird' at the back of his garden next to a supermarket.

He took it to a local vet, who contacted Marilyn Korkis at the Wiltshire Wildlife Hospital. She recognised it as a young stone-curlew, and brought it back to strength. The RSPB ringed it and released it at a local stone-curlew friendly farm, where it was later seen mingling happily with other young stone-curlews.

New advisor



RSPB

Charlotte Bruce-White has picked up where Diane White left off as our North Wessex Farm Conservation Advisor.

Charlotte grew up on her parents' farm near Salisbury where in her spare time she still manages a small flock of Wiltshire Horn sheep. She has previously worked as a stone-curlew project assistant and will now be providing advice on habitat management for stone-curlew and other farmland birds as part of the South West Farmland Bird Initiative.

Bumper bustard year?

A successful new release site and improved rear and release techniques has resulted in record-breaking survival of released birds.

In the first three years of the Great Bustard LIFE+ Project some major

advances have been made and to keep up momentum, in 2014, a third release site will be trialled. Combined with larger numbers of bustards to release, 2014 could be a defining year for the project as it seeks to establish a sustainable population of great bustards on and around Salisbury Plain.



Dave Klaer

Bustards are at their most spectacular during the breeding season. The picture shows Purple 5, the oldest male bustard in the UK, in full display. This sight can now be enjoyed every spring on the plain.

A successful partnership

As part of the South West Farmland Bird Initiative (SWFBI), over 100 farms have benefitted from conservation advice since 2010.

Farms have received advice on farmland birds and other farmland biodiversity, with many of those farms then going into an environmental scheme such as Higher Level Stewardship or taking up voluntary measures.

The project offered information to farmers through several events and workshops in 2013 and has engaged hundreds of members of the public by participating in events like Open Farm Sunday. This success is down to the unique approach the project has taken working with a wide range of conservation and farming partners to achieve a common goal.

The RSPB leads advice in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Wiltshire Chalk Country, one of four project areas in the initiative. This area covers stone-curlew and farmland bird hotspots in Wiltshire, Hampshire, and Berkshire.

To ensure continuity of advice across the core range of stone-curlews and one of the most important areas for farmland birds in the South of England, we also work closely with Tracy Adams, adviser for the Cranborne Chase AONB to the South.

For more information on farm wildlife or advice on habitat management for stone-curlew and other farmland birds, contact Charlotte on 01722 427251 charlotte.bruce-white@rspb.org.uk



Andy Hay (rspb-images.com)

Back from the brink: Stone-curlews looking for safe places to nest receive a LIFE+ line from the EU

Securing the future of the stone-curlew throughout the UK with LIFE+ funding

New advisers to help landowners give stone-curlews a boost have been funded in the Brecks and around Salisbury Plain, the two UK strongholds of this shy but nonetheless quirky and entertaining bird.

Conservationists, landowners and farmers have worked tirelessly together for over 30 years to protect and double the fragile remaining UK population of stone-curlews, which crashed after land use changes in the 1920s. The time has now come to help secure a future home for the our 'goggle-eyed plovers'

where they can prosper without the need for intensive rescues and hands on protection.

This means getting more stone-curlews nesting on well maintained fallow plots, and providing more short (<5cm) grazed grassland for foraging. We are ambitious and hope communities will rally behind the enigmatic stone-curlew and collaborate to get 80% of stone-curlews onto safe habitat by 2017.

The success of the stone-curlew recovery projects in both areas is well known amongst farmers and conservationists, but opportunities for the public to see and appreciate the birds are scarce as they are so

sensitive, and people therefore know very little about them.

To rectify this, we're installing viewing screens and interpretation boards at Minsmere and Winterbourne downs RSPB reserves, running more guided tours and funding new public engagement and communications officers in both UK strongholds in summer 2014. Look out for events coming soon near you.

For further information contact [Emily Field](mailto:emily.field@rspb.org.uk)
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Working together to give nature a home



The RSPB is the country's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home.



The RSPB is a member of BirdLife International, a partnership of conservation organisations working to give nature a home around the world.



LIFE+ is the EU's financial instrument supporting nature conservation, environmental, and similar communication projects throughout the EU, which contribute to implementing the Birds and Habitats Directives, and Natura 2000 network of protected sites.

